

Mindfulness seems to be all the rage now almost reaching hysteria like proportions. I am encountering it on a more regular basis in my role as a psychotherapist. Similarly, mindfulness is popular on social media sites, new related sites and different forums ranging from the spiritual to the psychological. What I frequently find is that often people confuse mindfulness with a psychological technique called focusing. Why is it important to discern the different between mindfulness and focusing?

The main reason is that they have very different objectives and intended outcomes. The process involved in the two share many similarities, but there are some important and distinct differences that people could be more aware of.

At its essence, mindfulness is a simple meditative observational technique. It involves an intention and conscious direction of awareness on what is occurring in the present moment. For example, we could begin to pay attention to our breath. The way the air feels going in and out. How our body rises and falls, or the tempo of our breathing. Simply by paying attention in this observational manner is mindfulness but with one omission. The omission is that in a mindfulness practice we allow all experiences to come and go. It is a practice of non-attachment to phenomena.

Our aim is simply to observe what passes through in experience. As it passes, we do our best to allow the experience to pass of its own accord. It is a continual state of letting go. Non-attachment also has the component of not judging experiences. One of the goals of mindfulness is to find a non-judgmental space which allows phenomena to unfold. Believing an experience is either good or bad or pleasant or unpleasant is the antithesis of mindfulness.

Mindfulness has some positive effects on how we function in the world. Not the least of these is that people often report reduced anxiety and stress. This is an important facet to consider particularly because many people live in highly stressful environments. It can also reduce rumination, help with emotional flexibility and has some cognitive benefits as well (better memory recall for one).

Perhaps the biggest benefit of mindfulness is that it creates a space between ourselves and an experience. The act of observation allows for a kind of distance between what is

experienced and what is observed. This is particularly useful as it allows a person to 'watch' an experience as opposed to getting overly caught up in the experience. When there is a bit of space we tend to function more effectively.

On the other side of the coin, mindfulness is sometimes touted as a panacea for all the worlds ills. I have read reports of it curing cancer and other fatal diseases, but without any evidence to support this contention. Mindfulness is not for everyone and in fact can have some negative effects on some people. The last point is not well known, but there is scientific evidence that mindfulness can harm some people.

I think there are also problems with how mindfulness is researched. There are difficulties discerning between whether mindfulness had an effect or whether the effect was due to concentration. In addition, as I was looking at material for this article, it became clear that some of the research attributed to mindfulness was a focusing technique.

For what it is worth, I think there are some real gains to be made by using mindfulness in our lives. It also has its uses therapeutically. For example, I frequently encounter people who have difficulty being ok with just being. Mindfulness is an excellent way to allow people to just focus on being in the present moment.

It is also useful for things like anger management. When our brains reach a tipping point and become overwhelmed by powerful emotions like anger neural pathways are reinforced. This causes a habitual negative cycle of dealing with anger that typically gets worse over time. Instead of breaking free from a destructive anger cycle people often find that they become prisoners of the emotion and associated behaviors. To make things even worse, we also know from brain scans that the neural pathways extend into different areas of the brain. Our brains literally become hijacked.

Mindfulness can be an effective tool in helping create new neural pathways which deal with anger more constructively. It can give a person a sense of empowerment over something which was previously running away with them. The upshot is that mindfulness and staying present does have a place in healing modalities.

Focusing is a term originally coined by Eugene Gendlin who was a psychologist and psychotherapist. Focusing shares several features with mindfulness. For example, it focuses attention on the inside of the body/mind. It is a meditative technique. Like mindfulness it encourages acceptance of experiences without judgment. This helps people

...ate compassion and acceptance of being which can be enormously healing for people.

...here mindfulness is about letting go and non-attachment, focusing is about going deeper and exploring. It is a way of interacting with ourselves in a new way which frequently incorporates a felt sense and intuition. One of the underpinnings of focusing is that the body knows best. It is something that I wholeheartedly agree with. Our bodies are hands down the best guide we have in how to navigate life. Sadly many people are out of touch with this important resource.

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been built up over time. By relaxing into the experience, we circumvent the resistance and allow the body to communicate to us.

- As the experience deepens often other emotions and sensations come up in surprising ways.
- An inner knowing or intuition is found which often provides a way forward.

I will give some ways to do focusing in a later article, for now this small example is sufficient to give a feel for how focusing works.

The danger of vignettes of this type is that they convey miracle cures or one shot wonders. This is rarely the case. Focusing is not a panacea for all of life's ills. But it is a useful and effective technique that people should be more aware of and employ in their lives.

Focusing is very powerful in helping people develop their inner knowing and intuition. It is way of getting to know a felt sense and then applying that to life in constructive ways. It is also noteworthy that while focusing has a technique element, it is also a way of being in the world. One of the implications of focusing is that we can use our felt sense and our bodies to be in the world in a far more productive, happier and healthier way than if we use the mind alone.

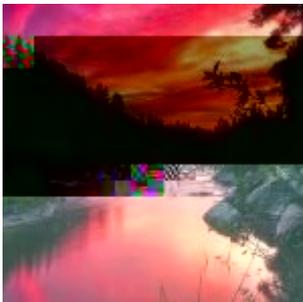
Focusing should not be viewed as better than mindfulness. Each has its own merits and shortcomings. Often when working with people, I ask them to get acquainted with mindfulness first. I find that the observational manner of mindfulness useful for people who are not acquainted with the mind in an experiential manner. I might at times ask these same people to use a focusing technique to explore something a little deeper than previously. To my way of thinking it is more a case of horses for courses as the situation arises.

In general, if you would like to let go, use mindfulness. If you want to explore something in a deeper way, use focusing. Knowing how to discern between the two and applying them in effectively in our lives is why it matters.

The Difference Between Mindfulness and Focusing and Why it Matters



Tips for Dealing with Anxiety



Anatomy of Emotions: Why we Should Embrace them Fully.



Physiological Cues, Intuition and Precognition

The Difference Between Mindfulness and Focusing and Why it Matters



The Role of the Pursuer and Distancer in Relationships